

1st EDITION COMMUNITY / FASHION DUO :

Wacu Kihara + Emilia Łapko

E.M. At first I would like to thank you for a great cooperation. It was longer than March in Kenya. Before my trip, we spent some time talking online about the project. This is how we met. I remember exchanging views and ideas. Then you were irreplaceable in Kenya. Fashion designer and business woman with two telephones. Of course, I saw a creative artist and designer in you.

W.K. Thank you so much Emilia. I had a great time zooming all over the place on Motorbikes looking for shoot locations, scouting for models and interviewing our Interns. It was an experience of a lifetime. It was great also talking on WhatsApp long before we met, sharing ideas and our inspiration. It was exciting too pairing the fabric you brought from Szczecin with our local Khangas and coming up with a cosmopolitan look that is a fusion of East meets West. I had lots of fun shopping along Biashara Street and introducing you to our Kenyan culture. I admired your patience and professionalism in dealing with models, interns and getting the perfect shot. I look forward to you showing me around Szczecin.

Thank you. I hope that your visit to Poland will be as exciting for you as the trip to Kenya was for me. Cultural differences are the power of inspiration, especially when we look at fashion. Can you tell me your short personal fashion definition?

Fashion to me is your entire look that defines your personality. I term it a form of self expression which incorporates everything you wear from head to toe. I personally dress according to my mood and the occasion. Weather also dictates what I wear.

Can you tell me about your education? I know I know you studied in Italy, this is the European capital of fashion!

I studied at Istituto Internazionale Politecnico della Moda or POLIMODA in Firenze affiliated to the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York (F.I.T.) and the Università di Firenze and Scuola ai Fini Speciale.

I had to learn Italian as very few people speak English and the course would be in Italian. I took a 7 month course at Centro Linguistico Italiano, Dante Aligheri in Firenze, Toscana which is where the best Italian is spoken

I did a 3 year Diploma course in Fashion Design courses included Costume History, Art History, Textiles, Knitwear, Drapery, Pattern Drafting, Stitching, Life Drawing among others. Our class exhibited at Linea Pelle in Bologna with an ecological Leather Vest and at Pitti Filati for our Menswear ensemble. For Graduation I presented a Masai inspired collection complete with Tyre sandals, Kenyan jewellery and woven baskets which my Mother brought with her all the way from Mombasa, Kenya.

You have a small company. Can you tell about your slow-fashion brand, a short history of Khangadelic?

Khangadelic symbolizes the colour and vibrancy of (Kenyan) coastal culture and lifestyle through contemporary clothing and accessories. Khangadelic has a passion for fashion and a love for the environment.

We registered Khangadelic in 2015 and started making clothing and accessories for friends and family. We have sold at Christmas craft fairs in Mombasa when we lived there and also provided our products on consignment to various Gift Shops in Diani, Malindi, Nairobi, Masai Mara and Naivasha.

But we have since moved away from that model as we feel it ties up our working capital and products because they only pay as they sell which for us does not make economical sense.

You also do not have control over how your product is displayed.

We have been to several International Trade Shows

NY NOW 2016, New York

FIHAV 2016, Cuba (Havana International Trade Fair )

Sourcing at MAGIC 2017, Las Vegas,

Spring Fair Birmingham 2018,

SheTrades Global 2018, Liverpool

When we moved back to Naivasha in 2019 we set up our showroom on the way to Buffalo Mall Naivasha and we get quite a number of walk in clients.

We prefer to focus on the export market, tourists and expatriates (based in and around Kenya).

However our business model is preferably an online model and we have been selling our Khanga face masks on eBay with much success through our USA Distributor based in New York.

We are also on Etsy and have been given a free Amazon store by the Kenya Export Promotion and Branding Agency (KEPROBA).

We are planning to list on Afrikrea, Tradeling (which focuses on the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) Region).

Our products are being shipped by KEPROBA to EXPO Dubai 2020 which will take place from October 2021 - March 2022. Khangadelic is one of 34 Enterprises showcasing under the Kenya Pavilion. We also have built our client base online through Social Media such as Facebook and

Instagram.

Being in Kenya, where the average temperature was over thirty degrees Celsius, I appreciated the protective function of the clothing. After two weeks, I started wearing a long loose linen shirt to protect me from the scorching sun. It should be noted that the first thing a tourist from Poland does after leaving the plane is to change into short clothes. What is the function of clothing: aesthetic, protective, increasing the social rank, etc?

Our clothing is a mix of occasion wear and everyday wear. It is for people who are interested in the colour and vibrancy of the Khanga fabric as well as the culture and lifestyle of the Kenyan coast. We do however make it contemporary by mixing other fabrics such as Linen, Jersey, Fleece and Satin.

The first thing that caught my attention in Kenya was beautiful people and their clothes. Strong colors, patterns, interesting clothes combinations. This is how the best stylists in Europe dress. It is interesting that the traditional kanga has survived and is still being worn. It also goes well with contemporary clothes. From my perspective, it looks impressive.

Why is clothing important to a Kenyan? Clothing in the context of a place (is appearance important, are there costumes for different occasions, etc.).

Kenyans are now more appreciative of their culture and African print fabrics. The Government of Kenya made it mandatory for all civil servants to dress in clothing made from African/ Kenyan print fabric on Fridays. Our President, Uhuru Kenyatta can be seen on occasion wearing an African shirt popularized by the Late President Nelson Mandela, the President of the Republic of South Africa. It is also popular during weddings and special occasions.

What do Kenyans wear and why (it can narrow the group, e.g. 20-30 years)? What is important to them: brand, quality, aesthetics, the latest trends, comfort, protective function etc.? What constitutes the value of the product?

It all depends on the economic status. Mitumba or second hand clothing is very popular because you can buy designer brands at very low prices. The clothes are very well made and you can find even Europeans or Americans visiting the local markets to buy second hand clothes. People shop according to the trends and can be very brand conscious.

Can you tell me what is mitumba? Do cheap clothes from America or Europe spoil the market in Africa?

Mitumba is second hand clothing which comes mainly from the UK, USA and Canada. They are very cheap and people can dress well at an affordable price. The garments are from brand names and so are well made and the finish is good. Yes they do reduce demand for Kenyan made clothes but Kenyan Designers have learnt to carve out a niche market for the demand of their clothing items locally and abroad especially from the Diapora.

The tradition of the inscriptions on the kanga: the message on the clothes - Why they are placed, the cultural and aesthetic context. (Can you write in your own words? I would prefer your text to be published.)

The messages on the khanga fabric are mainly proverbs and messages. They sometimes have hidden meanings for example if somebody wants to say something about their neighbour it is printed on the khanga and the person does not have to say a word but walk around in sight of the neighbour who will see the message. Special messages are printed for holidays, especially recently there was Idd ul Fitr, the Muslim holiday after a month-long fast called Ramadhan. So special Khangas are released with IDD messages. There are also Khangas with messages for weddings. During celebrations especially along the coast, the women wear matching khangas that have messages of blessings for the newly weds. Such as "Ndoa huunaganisha Jamii" meaning Marriage binds the village/ community

What do you think about tradition vs. novelty and trends in Kenyan fashion. Will the traditional ways of wearing a kanga remain?

Yes most definitely. I am sure you saw many women in the villages in Kilifi wearing Khangas or hanging them out to dry on the clothesline. I don't think you are considered Kenyan if you don't have at least one Khanga in your house whether you are from the village or live in an urban area. They are very handy to and comfortable to wear especially in the comfort of your home while relaxing or doing chores.

What is the value of clothing, frequency of purchases, and seasonality of clothing? Do people buy clothes for years or replace them every season?

This again depends on economic status. I can only speak for myself. I have clothes in my wardrobe that I bought in New York in 2016 and some from the second hand market for years. I also supplement my wardrobe with my own Khanga designs and I have accumulated quite a number over the years and have had some items for over 4 years now. We have a second hand store in Naivasha called Think Twice where when the clothes first arrive prices start at Kshs 700 and reduce every other day till they are Kshs 50. I frequently buy my clothes from there and have gotten some really good items at Kshs 50. The store can get quite packed with people hunting for bargains and these are people from all walks of life and economic status even Europeans and Americans go shopping there.

I do know however in Nairobi and other large cities, people have a lot of disposable income and I am sure they are more inclined to impulse buying and buying brand names.

Chinese products are flooding Kenya. This is reminiscent of Poland in the 1990s. I saw fakes of

great fashion house's e.g. Gouci and Verssace. I remember the inscriptions from Polish markets, i.e. adidos, nikee and graphic games with the logols. Do Chinese products spoil the internal market?

For some people price is more important than quality. The Chinese products have disrupted the local market and people prefer to buy those items rather than well made Kenyan products.

What senses are important to a Kenyan? Sight - appearance, pattern, color, inscription, touch - texture and weight of fabrics, gesture, movement, and touch - you have to touch it before you buy it, smell etc.

The senses most important to a Kenyan are sight – appearance, pattern, colour, inscription/ logos especially if it is by a well known brand or shows their “idols” Soccer, Basketball, Musicians etc

This is more so for the younger generation. Popular brands are Nike and Addidas.

A surprising selection of colors and patterns - people look beautiful. Where is it coming from?

I believe it is mainly historical, especially if you refer to the History of the Khanga.

We are also inspired by our surroundings, nature, animals, birds with brightly coloured plumage, flowers with explosive colours, fruits and vegetables, mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, the Indian Ocean, the sand and soil, breathtaking and awe inspiring sunsets and sunrises! We are surrounded by colour in our everyday life.

Why wouldn't we want to reflect that in our clothing?

Ecology - How is the public awareness of this topic manifested in Kenya, what is it like in the field of fashion?

There is more awareness in Slow Fashion in Kenya.

But we have never really been about Fast Fashion like in Europe or the US.

There are many fashion labels using upcycled materials which they buy from the second hand market e.g. Denim. Other brands upcycle Saris which are an Indian length of fabric that is draped around the body which is very beautiful and is commonly now used for contemporary wear. We have a big Indian community in Kenya. Their forefathers were brought to build the Kenya Uganda Railway in the early 1900s so they remained and are very prosperous traders and business people.

There are enterprises also producing local fabric which include Linen and Silk which are sustainably sourced and they use natural dyes.

POLEPOLE philosophy vs. SLOW FASHION philosophy - can it be translated?

I don't think there is a literal translation from English to Swahili but for sure the word Pole Pole can be used.

In Kenya it is not so easy to throw away clothes, there is always someone in need and clothes can be handed down from one sibling to another in families especially in families that are not so well off.

I remember when my kids were younger we put together all the clothes they had outgrown and take them to a children's home. The clothes were still in good condition and could be for used for a couple of more years.

Thank you for exchange of thoughts! I look forward to seeing you in Poland!